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DENVER DAN

AND

THE ROAD AGENTS.

By the Author of "Denver Dan and His Mystic Band," Etc., Etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE ROBBERY OF THE DENVER COACH—AN UNKNOWN WAIF.

"SORRY to trouble you, gents, but I'd jist like to have ye pass out yer watches, revolvers an' pocketbooks. Be lively, please, as I haven't got much time!"

The speaker was a small, wiry man, mounted on horseback, and he stood by the side of the Denver coach, the door of which he had thrown open, and held a revolver in each hand.

It was early morning, and the coach was only five miles distant from the city, having left less than an hour before.

The passengers thus suddenly alarmed, gazed out at the other window to see what the chances of escape in that direction might be.

They were not very promising.

A second man, also mounted and armed, stood ready to prevent any attempt at flight.

The coach had entered upon a winding stretch of road, which, with high rocks, steep banks and giant trees on either hand, made an excellent place for robbers to hide and suddenly spring out upon an unsuspecting traveler.

The driver had hardly got well upon this road when four or five men suddenly dashed out from behind a rock.

One of them instantly stopped the horses, while a second covered the driver with his revolver and ordered him to make no resistance, and a third and fourth posted themselves at the doors, the fifth man going to the rear and cutting the straps that held the trunks and boxes in place.

They fell down with a clatter, and a kick or two sufficed to open the most of them, spreading their contents promiscuously about.

"William, have the gentlemen who own these heavy trunks step out and unlock them for us," said the man in the rear.

The passengers were nearly all well armed; two were miners, one was an army officer, and three others were regular ruffians, men who could shoot as quick as winking, and take the wings off a fly at twenty paces, and yet here they were, cornered and compelled to give up their valuables to a force of men smaller than their own.

There was a lady in the coach, quite young, and remarkably pretty, who seemed to be entirely alone, and not only that, but having a small child in charge, a baby of a little more than a year old.

The suddenness of the attack paralyzed the men, and made them incapable of action, but the poor young thing fainted dead away from fright when she realized what had happened.

"Now, gentlemen, pass out your revolvers," said the man called William, and one by one the weapons were

passed out to this saucy robber, who threw them into a little bag hung around his neck.

"Now step out here, one at a time," he said, "and stand in a line; no crowding, please. The lady has fainted? Very well, let her remain in the coach."

The men stepped out, one at a time, and stood in line, looking decidedly sheepish and crestfallen, while two of the robbers proceeded to search them, the others standing guard with cocked revolvers, ready to shoot down the first man that resisted.

Suddenly, from the direction of the town, there appeared a solitary horseman, and the man at the rear of the coach, after looking at him, said, with a laugh:

"Here is another victim; wait a moment and we will have an extra lot of valuables, for the fellow owns a fine horse, apparently."

A nearer view of the solitary rider would have shown that he was not only well mounted, but well armed, also; and that upon his face was a half mask of black silk, and around his throat was a silken cord, to which was attached a silver whistle, now concealed in the bosom of his richly-ornamented shirt.

He held a pair of strong field glasses to his eyes, and gazed earnestly at the scene before him for a few moments without saying a word.

Suddenly, a shrill whistle sounded upon the air, and the robbers beheld the solitary rider bearing down upon them at full speed.

Then there were answering whistles, and a succession of wild shouts, while above all could be heard the startling cry:

"Denver Dan to the rescue! Death to the Road Agents!"

"Denver Dan!" repeated the leader of the robbers; "confound the impudence of this meddler! Away with you, boys; Denver Dan is abroad!"

Then, with a rush and a scramble, the robbers made off with what plunder they had already taken, while close upon their heels dashed a band of horsemen, the masked man at their head.

A volley was fired at the robbers, and two of them fell from their saddles with the death rattle in their throats, the rest spurring away as if Satan and all his imps were after them.

They soon darted down a rocky defile, and were lost amid the labyrinthian passages, while the masked man sounded a peculiar call upon his whistle, and summoned his men back to his side.

"Take the weapons and money of these coyotes," he said, pointing to the two dead bodies, "and then string them up to the trees as a warning that Denver Dan punishes all such with death."

The order was quickly obeyed, and two corpses swung to and fro in the morning breeze, as a terrible indication that Judge Lynch had been around.

"Now put your stage in order," said the mysterious man, "and proceed with your journey. Did I not know you, Sam Carson," he continued, addressing the driver, "to be a square man, I should say you had a hand in this matter. You're too smart a driver to be caught in this manner."

"I swear to goodness, Dan," answered the driver, "that I never knowed a thing about it until I seed the fellows rush out, and cover me with ther pops. Ye know, blamed well, that thar ain't a more square man than me from 'Frisco to the Missisip."

"Take better care next time, Sam," replied the man, and he was about to ride off with his band, when a cry from the coach attracted his attention, and he rode up to it.

The poor woman with the child had not recovered from her faint, and there was no chance that she would.

She was dead, the fright having killed her.

The poor baby was thus left friendless, nobody knowing the woman, who had been alone, and had no relations in this part of the country.

The dead body was lifted tenderly from the coach, and then the man called Denver Dan lifted the child up in his arms and soothed it, much to the surprise of the rough men around him.

"This child is the charge of Denver Dan," he said, "for it is our mission to aid the helpless and friendless!"

CHAPTER II.

THE BABY FINDS A HOME, AND DENVER DAN HEARS NEWS OF THE ROAD AGENTS.

A WORD of explanation is necessary, and then we will proceed with our narrative.

Denver Dan was the name of a man who was the leader of a band organized to punish law-breakers of every description, and many were the thrilling scenes through which they had been.

Numerous gangs of outlaws had been broken up and dispersed, those who did not leave the country after sufficient warning being shot or hanged upon sight.

No one knew how many there were in this band, as their meetings were secret, and no true member was known to divulge anything relating to it.

There had been a few traitors in the band, from time to time, but they had been summarily disposed of, and in a manner to deter others from following their example.

The leader was rarely seen in the city, or, at least, not to men's knowledge, for no one but those in the band knew his face by sight, and they never recognized him elsewhere but in the secret councils of the band, or when abroad upon duty with his mask on.

The band took the place of a Vigilance Committee, and was as much feared by the lawless desperadoes of the neighborhood, who never knew when they might be raided upon, or what man might inform upon them, for the members of the band were not known separately, and no one could tell how many there were.

A few only were known to belong to the band, and these were the leading spirits, the chosen and most trusted companions of the bold leader.

These were Sam Horton, a returned Australian, Mike Holcraft, Jack Travis, a lad of about eighteen, Joe Darrel, a new member of the band, but as fully trusted as any of the older members, and one or two others.

Of the more recent feats of the mystic band, was the dispersion of a band of outlaws led by a desperado named Colorado Charley, nearly all of whom had been shot or hanged,

and after the breaking up of which the good people of the region breathed more freely than they had for some time.*

Consequently, when the road agents heard that Denver Dan was coming they fled incontinently, well knowing that he would not spare a single one, but he and his men would shoot them down like so many dogs.

They had managed to secure considerable plunder, however, and with that they were forced to be content.

The passengers were not without weapons, for William, the man who had stood at the coach door and took the revolvers, was one of the two that were shot, and thus the weapons were recovered.

The stage was then driven off, and when it was out of sight Dan bade his men carry the body of the poor woman to the town, and if no one claimed it to give it Christian burial.

"I will look after this child myself," he said, and placing it before him upon the pommel of his saddle, put spurs to his horse and was soon out of sight.

"Wasn't Texas Jim in that crowd?" asked Horton.

"Yes; and so was Big Frank," said Mike Holcraft. "I knew him by his size."

"Texas Jim?" said Jack Travis; "that's the fellow that tried to help Charley clean me out at that place in Denver the night Charley passed in his chips."

"Exactly; and Pete Brown, that kept the place, gives these fellows points," said Joe Darrel, "and I'm not sure but what he sometimes joins them."

"Just let us catch him once, and he won't give any more points to these or any other fellows," added Mike. "He and Jim got away that night by pretending to be shot, or at least Jim did."

"He's a sly fox," said Sam Horton, "and he tried hard to get into the Pocket once, but I peppered him and made him make tracks."

"Sam's Pocket" was the name of a ravine that Horton had discovered while prospecting for silver, and though the vein had been worked out, the place was used by the mysterious band commanded by Dan as a place of meeting.

"There's no chance of catching those fellows now," said Darrel, "and I'm going into Denver to see what I can learn about them. The rest of you had better scatter, I guess."

The four companions at once put spurs to their horses, and galloped away in different directions.

Meanwhile Dan had looked in vain for someone who knew or was related to the poor woman who had suddenly left the world, but without learning anything satisfactory concerning her.

He discovered that her name was Mrs. Haredale, and that she was supposed to have a husband living in the east; but what his other name was, or where he lived, or what trade he followed could not be ascertained.

The clothing of the child would not indicate that its parents were in more than ordinary circumstances, and there were no marks either on that or the baby itself by which he could be identified.

He was a pretty little fellow, and had the deepest, most bewitching blue eyes, fringed with long silken lashes of a rich brown color, his complexion being of that delicate shade of pink found in sea-shells.

"He's a poor little waif, anyhow, and has got to be looked after," said Dan, after learning what little he could. "His father may be rich some day, if he isn't now, and will probably endeavor to hunt up the little rascal. I'll see that you have a good home, my boy," he continued, addressing the child, who laughed and crowed, and the vigilante at once set about putting his plan into execution.

He took the child to Mrs. Travis, the mother of Jack,

* For an account of this feat, which, though not necessary to the understanding of this tale, is nevertheless interesting, read "Denver Dan and his Mystic Band," by the same author, in No. 433 of the FIVE CENT WIDE AWAKE LIBRARY.

and asked her to take good care of it, telling her not to let anyone have it without first notifying him.

It was evening, and he was walking through one of the by-streets dressed as a miner, and with his mask off, when he suddenly met a man similarly attired.

"Important news, captain!"

"What is it?"

"Pete Brown is at his old place running a faro-bank, and is to meet some of the Road Agents there to-night."

"Then we must show him that Denver Dan has got an eye upon him!"

CHAPTER III.

THE PLOTTERS OVERHEARD—A SAD BLOW TO THE MYSTIC BAND.

IN a small, closed room, seated about a round table, over a trap-door in the floor, were four men, all talking earnestly, and at the same time.

"Now, see here," said one, hammering on the table with his fists. "Don't let's all talk at once, or we will never come to an agreement."

"Very well—what have you got to say, Jim?" asked a short, red-faced man, who sat nearest the door, and was called Brown.

"My plan is this: So long as Denver Dan remains in this neighborhood, we can't expect to do any business. My name is Texas Jim, and I'm called a terror down whar I b'long; but I'll be chewed up if I ever see sech an all-fired promiscuous fellar as this yer Dan. He's everywhar ter onct, an' we ain't done a good job fur a month but what he's been into it, an' sp'iled it fur us."

"What are ye goin' ter do?" asked a man called Big Frank, from his enormous size.

"Git out'n hyar—emigrate to some place whar ther ain't no cussed Denver Dans to bother an honest Road Agent."

"Ye're afraid of him!" said Brown.

"No, -I ain't; but I'm blasted tired of hevin' this yer pup turn up at every job, an' allus git off. Ef I thort I c'u'd kill ther skunk, I wouldn't mind; but blast his hide, the bullet ain't east, nor the knife ain't made, what kin kill him. He's the devil hisself fur gittin' out o' bein' killed."

"I opine to the b'liefs o' the gentleman from Texas," said the fourth man. "They call me Larry the Wolf, an' d'ye know why? Kase if I find I'm cornered in one place, I goes somewheres else. What I want, is money, an' I kin kill if I don't git it when I ax fur it. That's my crackter—that is, I'm fur goin' down Santa Fe way. They ain't no cussed Vigilantes thar, an' we kin fill our pockets, an' then waltz away to another hole."

"Bah! yer a regular fly-by-night; yer no good!" said Big Frank.

"So's a wolf a fly-by-night, an' I'm a wolf wi' his teeth filed."

"D'ye know that the mail coach goes through the Sou'-west Pass at midnight?" asked Brown, suddenly, fearing a quarrel.

"No; does it?" asked they all.

"Yes."

"Then that's my persimmon!" was the response of Big Frank.

"Git the boys, Frank," said Jim, who was the leader of the Road Agents, "an' be thar. Count on me an' Larry; an' to show ye I ain't afeard o' Denver Dan, jest let him show his black face to-night, an' I'll slug him, sure's my name's Jim Brodie, of Texas!"

The men arose to go, when at that very moment there came a knock at the door.

"Git ready to clear out by way o' the cellar, boys," said Brown, and, going to the door, he asked who was there.

There was a whispered response through the key-hole, and then Brown opened the door.

An old negro woman entered, and in a startled whisper she said:

"Fo' de Lawd's sake git out ob heah quicker dan scat! Debil Dan is in de sullah, an' a listenin' ter eb'ry bressed fing you 'uns says. I jist diskibered him when I went fo' de whiskey, an' I'se locked him in dar!"

"Was there anyone with the pup, Dinah?" asked Brown.

"Yes, sah; dere was two fellers, an' dey all free had black hanketchers ober dere faces; but I knowed 'at one ob 'em was Debil Dan."

"Denver Dan, you mean."

"Yes, dat was it; Debler Dan. I know dat chap, 'cause he fooled me afo', but I has got eben wid him dis time, yah-yah, so I has!"

"Shut up your black mouth, or I'll put my fist in it," said Jim. "I'm goin' to see this yer meddlin' cuss, an' have a chat wi' him."

He pushed the table aside, and threw open the trap door.

A man was seen crouching in the darkness, wearing a suit of buckskin, a slouched hat and black mask, and carrying a rifle slung over his shoulder.

"The very man!" shouted Jim, at the instant firing a shot at the man's head.

He seemed to stagger to his feet, but a second shot from Jim toppled him over, and he fell in a very much demoralized heap right under the trap, face upward.

A bullet wound in the forehead through which gushed a red stream showed how fatal the shot had been, the man lying as stiff as a rail.

"You're sure it's Dan?" said Frank.

"Sure! Yes; don't I know him? We've cooked his goose for him this time."

"There's more on 'em down thar, an' I'm goin' fur 'em," said Big Frank, and in a moment he had jumped down the trap.

It was a hazardous thing to do, and Jim shouted out a hasty warning, but it was too late.

His feet had no sooner touched the dead body below, supposed to be that of the redoubtable Denver Dan, before half a dozen pistol shots resounded through the place.

He fell prostrate, killed instantly, being literally pierced with bullets.

The others ran to the trap-door, and fired obliquely into the darkness, hoping to hit someone, though there was not a man in sight.

The volley was returned in good earnest; Texas Jim having his hat knocked off, and Larry the Wolf losing a piece of his left ear.

Then there was heard that shrill whistle by which Denver Dan always summoned his men to his side.

Strange to say, it seemed to come, not from below, nor yet from outside, but sounded in the very room itself.

Then the door was broken open, and a number of masked men rushed in.

There was an oil lamp stuck in a bracket in the wall, and Texas Jim sent a bullet crashing through the bottom, letting the oil out upon the floor.

At the same time, Brown made a dive for the door of a small closet on the other side.

He immediately disappeared from view, followed by Texas Jim, who received several bad wounds, but no fatal ones.

"They've wiped out poor Dan," said Mike Holcraft, lighting a torch he carried, "but his band is not yet dead, by any means, and we will be sure to avenge him."

"You fellers want ter git right out o' hyar," said Sam Horton, to a number of gamblers that had strolled in, "or we'll shoot. We don't know anythin' against ye to-night, but we give yer fair warnin'."

"An' dat air Debil Dan is done been shot dead, deader'n a herrin'?" asked the old negress, who had remained in the room all the while.

"Yes, he's been done fur at last," said Sam. "Git out'n hyar, you old snow-flake, or I may be wantin' to kiss yer. Let's take his body off, boys, the blasted road agents won't get that, anyhow."

The gamblers had left, the room being now filled with Dan's men, all masked, the old negress having flounced out when Sam threatened to kiss her.

Sam advanced to the hole, and by the light of another lamp which had been procured, looked down.

"By darn! What's all this?" he cried. "The bodies are gone!"

The others crowded around, and, to their surprise, the empty hole before them assured them that Sam had spoken the truth.

The bodies of both Big Frank and the renowned Denver Dan had been removed, a pool of blood being all that was left to indicate their former presence.

CHAPTER IV.

HANDSOME JACK FOREVER—A SOLEMN SUMMONS.

It was a sad party that met in Sam's Pocket that night, for a terrible blow had fallen upon the mystic band.

Denver Dan, the man who had so often led them to victory, the founder of the organization, the companion and friend of every man of them, and their chosen leader to boot, was dead, and they nevermore would behold him.

No more would the shrill blast of his silver whistle summon them to his aid, no more would his manly form, mounted upon the noble steed which so long had borne him, be seen dashing forward, the terror of evil doers and the pride of his followers.

He was dead, and the road agents and criminals of all classes would rejoice, and once more the reign of terror for all lovers of law and order would begin and red-handed villany go unchecked.

All the band were present, including Sam Horton, Joe Darrel, Mike Holcraft and young Jack Travis, the dearly-beloved companion and confidential ally of the dead leader.

"How did it happen, any how?" asked Sam.

"Well, Dan and Joe and myself and one or two others went into the cellar," said Jack, "and hid, intending to come up through the trap and surprise those fellers. That darkey woman blowed on us, and before we knowed anything the trap was raised and the figure of Dan being in sight, they popped at it and knocked it stiff."

"Who gave the whistle?" said Sam.

"Dunno, but it couldn't 'ave been Dan," answered Joe. "Jack an' me, we toted off the bodies and strung Big Frank up, while we buried the other, just where Dan had told us to, in case he was knocked under."

"Where is it?" asked Sam.

"We mustn't tell," said Jack. "Dan made us promise not to."

"All right, but what are we goin' to do now?"

"Keep up the band," answered the boy, "just as if Dan was alive. We can tell folks that it was a mistake and that Denver Dan still lives, and so he does!"

"What? Still lives!" cried the men, in chorus.

"Yes, in our memories," answered Jack. "You don't intend to forget him in a hurry, do you?"

"No—no—no!"

"That's right; rely upon it, my men, that there'll be plenty to do yet, and Denver Dan would rest uneasy in his secret grave if we didn't do all we could to put down these murderin', thievin' wretches, that make the very name of the law a laughin' stock."

"We'll do it!" cried the men. "Death to all outlaws!"

No one could doubt after that that the spirit of Denver Dan was with them, even if he was not present in the flesh.

"We shall want a leader," said Sam Horton. "Who will it be?"

There was silence for a moment, all present turning their eyes toward the speaker.

"Come—come," he said, impatiently. "Who is the man to fill the place of Denver Dan as leader of our band?"

"Jack Travis!" shouted some.

"Joe Darrell!" shouted others, though they were not so numerous as those who had called out for Jack.

Sam bit his lip in evident vexation and turned away.

"Jack Travis!" then shouted all, and the cry was repeated until the young man, stepping upon a raised platform at the back of the cavern in which the meeting was held, raised his hand as a token of silence.

In an instant not a sound could be heard, and then the handsome young fellow, gazing about him, spoke thus:

"Members of this mystic band, I feel mightily proud at bein' chosen to fill the place of so brave a man as Denver Dad. I'll tell ye plainly that I don't believe I could do it. Nobody could, and I must decline."

"But we've got ter hev a leader—some one what's an acknowledged head o' the band," said Sam, "else it'll all fall ter bits."

"No danger o' that," answered Jack. "Listen to me a minute. Fur the present, let the spirit o' Denver Dan lead and direct us. At the end of a month, if you are of the same mind, I'll be your leader, and if you think someone else will do better, put him in and I won't complain. You may find a better man by that time. Are you agreed to this?"

"You can be our acting leader," said Joe; "that is, supposin' Dan was not dead, but on'y gone away for a bit, and told you to take his place till he came back."

"That's it!" shouted all hands.

"In case he don't come back in a month, which we don't suspect he will, then we must choose a leader. You, presidin' at the meetin', if you git chosen, all right; an' if someone else gits it, all right, too."

"I'm satisfied, then, to be leader *pro tem*, as they say in the east," responded Jack. "Is that all right?"

"Yes. Three cheers for Jack Travis, our leader!" shouted Mike Holcraft; and every man joined in giving three cheers.

"Handsome Jack forever!" said Joe Darrel, and another round of cheers was given.

"Thanks," said Jack, drawing a mask over the upper half of his face. "Now to business. The mail coach is to be attacked in the Southwest Pass at midnight. We must be there and prevent the robbery."

"We will be there, noble captain," said Mike, Joe, Sam, and some others.

"Every man must be on hand, and when I give the signal—the cry of a night owl—do you all blow your call whistles, and rush in after me. Kill every man of them, and don't let Texas Jim escape."

"We won't, you kin bet on that," responded Joe. "He's a slippery cove, but we'll get even with him. 'Twas he that shot at Denver Dan."

At that instant a startling sound was heard.

The well-known whistle of Denver Dan rang clear and sharp through the cavern, causing every man to spring to his feet.

"The spirit of Denver Dan calls!" cried Jack. "Away with us, our assistance is needed! Away!"

The whole assembly rushed from the place, while Jack dashed the torches to the floor and followed.

Outside, at the top of the ravine, the men were gathered about a tree, in a crotch of which a blazing torch was stuck, and under which was a paper pinned to the bark by a Bowie knife.

Upon the paper, lit up by the flaming torch, these words were written:

"Go at once to the entrance of the Southwest Pass, and do your duty, never forgetting to keep in remembrance and to act under the guidance of

"THE SPIRIT OF DENVER DAN."

"'Tis a most solemn summons," said Jack, detaching the paper, and taking the torch in his hand. "To horse, my boys, and away, and be our motto and war-cry: 'Death to all outlaws!'"

CHAPTER V.

STIRRING SCENES IN THE MOUNTAINS.

THE night was dark and threatening rain, the clouds hanging heavily over the scene—a dreary pass in the mountains—not a star being visible.

The mail coach came lumbering along, the driver on his box and the guard behind, both fully armed, keeping a look-out for robbers, with which the mountains were known to be infested.

Inside the passengers nodded and dozed, their arms folded and their heads resting upon them, while they dreamed only of reaching their homes, and never once thought of road agents or anything else.

Suddenly, at a sharp turn in the pass, where the road upon one side fell off into a sheer precipice of many hundred feet, a mountain torrent roaring and tumbling below, there was heard a most startling sound.

"Halt!"

The word was uttered in a short, sharp, commanding tone, indicating that the person who had spoken it meant to be obeyed.

The guard at once drew rein, holding his revolver in readiness at the same time, so that he might fire in case the man proved an enemy.

"Who goes there?"

"Get down from that box!"

The driver saw where the sound came from, and though he could see no one he acted most promptly.

Hardly had the sentence been finished before he fired, the shot echoing again and again from rock to rock.

He instantly slid from his seat down behind the thick leather boot, which would resist pistol shots almost as well as sheet iron plates.

He did not do so too soon, for a bullet came whizzing past the spot where his head had been a moment before.

The horses, alarmed at the sound, broke into a trot and dashed along the rocky road with the speed of the wind.

Two men dashed out and attempted to stop them, but one was thrown down, and falling under their feet was quickly trampled to death.

The other man instantly fired a bullet at the leader's head, killing him instantly, and tumbling him in a heap under the hoofs of the pole horses.

Then a party of the road agents, for such they were, came swarming down the rocks, and while two of them seized the frightened horses by the bits, and brought them to a halt, a third man sprang up to the box, supposing the driver had been killed.

The man was thoroughly alive, however, and as soon as the robber's head appeared he sent a bullet through it, the wretch falling to the ground without a groan.

There were a good many of the robbers, however, and they swarmed about the coach like so many bees.

Shots were fired at and returned by both guard and driver, the doors were thrown open, and the passengers, rudely awakened, commanded to give up their valuables, and altogether a scene of the utmost confusion ensued.

In the midst of it all, a number of dancing lights appeared on the rocks above and the cry of a night owl was heard.

It was answered by many peculiar calls, and then a voice shouted out in clear, ringing tones:

"Upon them, boys! Death to all outlaws."

The robbers turned with surprise to the spot whence this startling cry proceeded, and the next moment a lithe form came bounding down the rocks and stood in their very midst.

Other forms rushed up, each one carrying a light, and then began a regular fusilading.

The leader wore a half mask of some black stuff over his face, and seemed to fear nothing.

He rushed valiantly upon the robbers, firing right and left, and calling upon the passengers to defend themselves.

The robbers saw that they would have a small chance of obtaining any plunder, and firing a last volley at the enemy, started off up the pass.

Then a shrill whistle was heard, and on a point of rock just ahead of them there shot up a bright sheet of flame.

In the full light of this stood a tall man, dressed in black, his entire face being covered with a green mask, which glistened in the fire light.

In each hand he held a revolver, and as the robbers dashed up he fired half a dozen shots in rapid succession.

"Never forget the memory of Denver Dan!" he cried, in a singularly hollow voice, and then after firing another volley, suddenly and most unaccountably disappeared.

At the same moment the fire went out all at once, leaving the place in the blackest darkness.

The robbers suddenly found themselves hemmed in, a second band of Vigilantes, headed by Joe Darrel, appearing in the pass just ahead of them.

Some of them were unhorsed, and one leaped boldly over the cliff, claspings a man in his arms.

At that very moment the storm broke, and a vivid flash of lightning disclosed to the eyes of Jack Travis and his men the form of Sam Horton clasped in the arms of Texas Jim, and then both disappeared over the cliff!

"Merciful Heaven! He will be lost!" cried Jack. "It is certain death!"

The Vigilantes paused in their vigorous attack, and the robbers, taking advantage of the confusion, broke away, and escaped, or at least, about half their number did, the rest having been slain.

Larry the Wolf was among those who had got away, and Joe Darrel said he could swear that Brown was with them also.

The passengers had been pretty thoroughly aroused by this time, but the danger now being all over, they settled themselves to sleep once more, while the plucky driver mounting his box drove off, the dead horse having been replaced by one belonging to the robbers; its rider being dead, and therefore in no condition to claim ownership.

"Poor Sam!" said Jack. "I'm sorry he's been done for, but at any rate Texas Jim won't bother us again. Away with you, and await my summons!"

CHAPTER VI.

A TIMELY RESCUE AND A MYSTERY.

WHEN Texas Jim leaped from the cliff with Sam Horton in his grasp he did not fall to the bottom, though when he made that wild plunge it was but with the thought of certain death in his mind.

Between being shot and being dashed to pieces far below upon the rocks, he chose the latter, resolving that if he must die he would have company.

About ten feet below the edge there was a rocky shelf upon which grew a stunted tree, and near this was an opening large enough for a man to lie down.

The men in their fall struck this tree and were thrown back upon the rock, where they both lay stunned for many minutes.

Texas Jim was the first to recover, and listening attentively, he discovered that the road above was deserted, both the robbers and their pursuers having departed.

The storm was raging furiously, and it was the rain beating upon the outlaw's upturned face that had aroused him.

By the lightning's flash he discovered his late adversary

lying unconscious by his side, and he smiled with wicked satisfaction as he gazed upon the senseless form.

"Ha-ha! Sam Horton," he hissed, "your game is up, is it? Ye've led me a tough chase, baffled me in winning the woman I wanted, got ahead of me in striking silver in the Pocket, when I knew it was there as well as you, cornered me in other things, and at last hunted me down because I made my money easy an' ye hed to work for't."

He paused, and just then the light of the electric flash showed him that Horton was beginning to revive.

He had indeed opened his eyes and uttered a few incoherent words, and then as Jim looked at him, raised himself upon one elbow and gazed around him.

"So you're here yet, are you, Jim?" he said to the outlaw.

"Yes; but the place is too small for us both."

"What are you going to do?"

"Throw you over, Mr. Sam. Ye've been in my way too long, an' now I've got to git rid on ye."

"It won't be the fust time ye've tried to take my life, Jim. Ye're a bad lot, an' if Denver Dan or his men git at ye, I wouldn't gi' a nickel fur yer chances."

"Denver Dan is wiped out, an' his band don't amount ter shucks wi'out him. I put a bullet through Dan's head myself."

"You lie! Denver Dan ain't any more dead than I are, an' he's on yer track now."

"Stuff! Ye can't fool me, Sam, fur I saw him laid out stiffer'n a herrin', with Big Frank on top o' him. I'm goin' ter chuck ye down thar, an' you'll be deader'n he war."

He seized Sam by the waist, and was about to drag him to the edge of the narrow ledge, when suddenly the click of a revolver was heard above his head.

He glanced up, and saw, bending over the cliff, the figure of a man, tall and shapely, dressed all in black, and wearing a green mask.

He dropped back, and a bullet went whistling over his head.

With a wild laugh, he crawled along the rocky shelf, and, seizing a vine that depended from a fissure in the cliff, lowered himself to another ledge, some distance below.

Sam sprang after him, but the villain raised his weapon, and taking aim when the lightning revealed his enemy to him, was on the very point of firing.

There was a shot from above, and the pistol was knocked from his hand, while with a shriek he rolled over the edge of his new place of lodgment.

"Above there!" shouted Sam. "Are you a friend or foe to Denver Dan's band?"

"A friend!" cried the Green Mask, in the same hollow tones that had so startled the hearers when he had first appeared.

"Then help me out of this, for I haven't the strength to climb up the cliff."

"Be patient a moment, and I will aid you."

In a few moments Sam saw a thick, strong strap dangling above his head, and seizing this, he pulled it down to him.

The stranger had apparently taken part of the harness of one of the dead outlaws' horses, and had improvised a means for rescuing the imperilled man.

There was a loop at one end, and Sam, securing it around his body under his arms, caught hold of the part above his head and called out to the mysterious being above to haul away on it.

The next moment Sam found himself arising, and putting his feet against the rocks, he greatly assisted the man above in hauling him up.

He soon came to the top, and stood upon his feet beside his preserver.

The latter pointed to a horse near at hand, and then started off, but Sam detained him.

"Hold on, stranger," he said; "won't you let me thank ye?"

"No thanks are needed," replied that hollow voice.

"Who are you?"

"The Green Mask."

"And a friend to Denver Dan?"

"Yes."

With that the strange creature strode away and disappeared behind a rock. Sam followed instantly, but the man had entirely vanished, though the road was clear and straight for a hundred feet!

CHAPTER VII.

THE WORK OF THE GREEN MASK.

AROUND a fire in a secluded glen of the mountains were seated half a dozen outlaws, their whole appearance betokening them to be such beyond the shadow of a doubt.

Larry the Wolf, who seemed possessed of as many lives as a cat, possessing the power of turning up alive and hearty after every "scrimmage," was the principal man in the party.

A bad cut over his right eye, which gave him a rakish look, and a severe contusion upon his nose, showed that in the recent encounter in the Southwest Pass, he had not come away unscathed, while the difference in size between his two ears was a reminder of the fight in Brown's gambling hole at Denver.

He was as much given to "smelling blood" as ever, as his words will indicate.

"That 'ere tussle last night war a bad 'un," he mutters, "an' it don't seem to be no use to stay 'roun' yer no longer. I kin smell blood, an' it's our blood, too, worse luck. It's a durned shame thet Texas Jim got wiped out, fur me an' him had a bully plan on foot."

"Ye ain't sure he is wiped out," said Brown, who was at that moment engaged in picking the bones of a chicken, stolen, of course.

"Not wiped out?" said Larry, in surprise. "D'ye s'pose as a man kin jump off'n a clift like that yer, an' not git busted ter 'tarnal smash!"

"He mought 'ave struck agin a tree or suthin'," said another of the party named Frank Little, but called Little Frank to distinguish him from Big Frank who had been done for at Brown's place.

"Then he'd 've had his in'ards ripped out by ther branches. I'll bet a plug o' 'baccy thet we won't see no more o' Texas Jim on this yeth."

"Hand over ther 'baccy, then, quicker'n scat," said a voice.

Every man sprang to his feet in a second and seized his ever ready revolver.

"Easy, boys, easy," said Texas Jim, himself, walking into their midst, "I ain't dead yit. I kin tell yer, though, I comed blarsted nigh onto it. Gi' us a bite, fur I'm as hungry as a starved coyote."

"Hyar's yer 'baccy, Jim, and I'm durned glad ye 'arned it, blowed ef I ben't," and Larry passed over the "weed," while Jim sat down, and while he made a hearty breakfast, proceeded to tell how he had escaped.

"The wust on it is thet Sam Horton got away at ther same time, an' we've got ter do thet 'ere job over ag'in. I'd like ter know how them fellers suspicioned w'at we war about, though; hang me if I wouldn't!"

"More on 'em than we knowed must've l'arned it," suggested Pete Brown. "We tho't we'd killed them as was in the secret, but I reckon they'd guv the thing away afore we popped 'em."

"Ye kin bet thet's how it is. Dan's dead fur sartin, but this yer green-masked chap is wuss nor a dozen Dans. Sw'ar ter the devil, I b'lieve he's Dan's spook, an' thet thar ain't no more use in tryin' ter kill him than thar is in tryin' ter fight a grizzly wi' a Jack-knife."

"Ef a ghost or a spook kin hit a feller a clip on his noz-

zle hard enough ter knock him clean off'n his pins, then he's a ghost; but ther wolf never sawr so lively a dead ghost afore; ye kin bet a chaw'r o' 'baccy on't."

"D'ye know what I'm goin' ter do?" asked Jim, finishing his meal.

"No; tell us."

"I know Sam's Pocket fust-class, an' I'm gwine ter make a raid on it when them fellers is all thar, an' clean out the hull lot."

"By durn, we'll do it."

"S'posin' we make tracks fur it ter onet?"

"All hunky; s'posin' we does."

* * * * *

A tall sycamore stands across the path, and from one of the lower branches hangs something that swings to and fro in the morning air.

It is a ghastly sight, and the outlaws, as they come upon it, shudder and turn pale.

That swinging object is the body of a man, his face distorted with the agonies of death, his hands still clutched convulsively, though there has evidently been no life in his frame for some hours, his heart being icy cold.

To his breast there is pinned a paper upon which the villains can read, or at least Jim and Larry can, the others being too ignorant to do so, these terrible words, penned in bold characters:

"Lanky Bill, outlaw. The penalty for all such is death. The spirit of Denver Dan still lives. Beware of
"GREEN MASK."

"By durn, this yer's a bad business," says the Wolf. "Bill were one o' yer best men; eh, Jim?"

"Yer right, he were. Cut him down, boys, so's the coyotes won't get at him."

Pete, Jim, and Larry had gone on ahead, leaving the others to cut down the body of the dead outlaw, when the Wolf suddenly uttered a howl.

"By durn, yer's another!"

He was right; there was another, and pinned to his breast was an announcement that Sly Ben, road agent, had paid the penalty of his crimes, and that the Green Mask was still at work.

Within a distance of three hundred feet, the trees bore more of this same fatal fruit, the bodies of Texas Bob, One-Eyed Charley, and Red Tom, named so from the color of his hair, all notorious Road Agents and horse-thieves, and pals of Texas Jim, were found hanging on the trees as the others had been.

To the breast of each was pinned a paper bearing the same dread legend, all signed by the same avenging hand, and proving that the terrible Green Mask was indeed at work, and in dead earnest, too.

Texas Jim uttered a string of the most blood-curdling oaths, and heaped malediction after malediction upon the head of this mysterious personage, who, although a new-comer, seemed to outstrip even Denver Dan by the celerity and completeness of his work.

"Thar's on'y one thing ter be done," he cried, uttering more oaths, and utterly exhausting his powers of invective.

"What's that 'ar?"

"Ter make one durned rush fur this yer green-masked chap the fust time we see him."

"An' ter travel in company an' wi' our fingers on the trigger allus," added Larry.

"An' ter clean out Sam's Pocket," continued Jim, "an' git rid of the hull durned tribe of Vigilantes!"

CHAPTER VIII.

FACE TO FACE WITH THE MYSTIC BEING.

NONE of the outlaws were mounted, and as they walked along in a compact body, each man with a revolver ready

cocked in his hand, they presented a formidable appearance.

No one seeing them could for a moment doubt that they were a most determined set of cutthroats, and that, driven to the last extremity as they were, it would take a large force to subdue them.

Every man in the party felt that he held his life in his hand, and was resolved not to give it up without a fierce struggle.

Their only safety now was to keep together, to be in the utmost harmony with each other, and to let no quarrels nor dissensions creep in; for as surely as they did, so surely were they doomed, their only hope now being perfect union.

"It's come ter this," said Jim. "We're cornered an' we've got to fight wi' tooth an' nail an' keep all together. It's the single men being picked off, what thins us out. One at a time, when ye keep it up stiddy, is boun' fer ter make a big hole in a gang, arter a while."

"Sh!" said Larry, suddenly springing behind a tree at the very edge of the wood.

"What's up?" whispered Jim, dropping to the ground, while the others crouched near him.

"I kin smell blood," was the characteristic answer.

"Whose is it?"

"That young feller's yonder!" he said. "He's a comin' along on foot, and he's a honest look what I don't like fur nothin'."

"D'ye know him?" whispered Jim, creeping up to the Wolf, who was gifted with very sharp eyes.

"Dunno;" and then in another moment he added, in a most impressive whisper: "Do I know him? By durn, I 'low I do. It's ther Green Mask!"

The terrible and most mysterious being was then almost within their grasp!

There was but one thing to do; but one thought came to the minds of all.

He must be slain.

Vengeance must be had upon him for the lives of their dead comrades, and his life could alone suffice.

"Let's go fur him!" whispered Jim. "Make a blarsted rush at him, an' riddle him wi' builets."

"No—no; wait till he comes up, an' then pepper him; ef we go fur him now, he'd git scairt an' run."

"Thet's so."

"Jess wait till I hail him, an' then when I say the word, blaze away. We'll jest let him know that we're aroun' afore we pop at him, so's he'll know who's adom' on it."

"All right. Mind now, boyces, don't ye shoot till the wolf gi'es ye ther word."

The tall, lithe figure of the mysterious terror approached rapidly, clothed wholly in black, and wearing a green mask which entirely concealed his face.

As he came opposite the tree where the Wolf was concealed, that worthy suddenly sprang out and pointed a revolver at his head.

"Throw up your hands!"

The command was at once obeyed.

"Now let's see your face," continued the Wolf.

He advanced a pace, and tore off the green mask.

As he did so, he uttered a cry of horror which was echoed by all the others.

To his uttermost dismay, the mask, when torn off, revealed, not a human face, but a ghastly, grinning skull!

From the hollow sockets of the eyes was emitted a glittering red light as though large rubies had been inserted which flashed as never gems flashed before.

"My God!" cried Larry, springing back, and taken completely off his guard.

Then the hands of the terrible being descended swifter than lightning, and in each was a six-barrelled revolver.

Swifter than thought the fatal bullets sped to their mark, and as one by one in the quickest possible succession the shots were fired, two shots sounding as one, howls of rage

and agony followed, as the villains were shot dead or badly wounded.

Then with the speed of a deer the lithe figure bounded away, and in a moment more the patter of horses' hoofs upon the sward were heard, while with a ringing laugh came wafting by these words:

"Ha—ha! Follow me if you dare! There is still work in plenty for the Green Mask!"

Pete Brown and three others had been killed outright. Little Frank had an ugly wound in the side which would need attending to at once. Texas Jim showed two holes in his hat and another through the sleeve of his coat; while the Wolf had met with his usual luck by losing two fingers of his left hand, another piece of the already curtailed ear, and the top of his nose; besides getting a bad crack in the knee which brought him to grass, and probably prevented him from being more badly used.

"I'll be durned," he said, "as he picked himself up, and began bandaging his numerous hurts. 'Thar won't be anything left o' me if I keep on gittin' shot away in bits.'"

"Why the blue blazes didn't we do as we fust tho't?" said Jim. "Ef we'd 've piled right onter him, afore he knowed nothin', we'd 'a made a reg'lar pepper box out'n him; but ez ther case stan's now, we've lost three more men an' ain't hurt him fur all our shots, an' wuss'n that, he's still free to work agin' us."

"W'at's done can't be undone," said the Wolf. "Now fur eternal vengeance on Handsome Jack. Let's put our han's in Sam's Pocket. I kin smell blood, an' it ain't nice, neither!"

CHAPTER IX.

VAGUE SUSPICIONS—ROUT OF THE ROAD AGENTS.

JACK TRAVIS, Sam Horton, Joe Darrell and Mike Holcraft, were all seated at a table in the room back of the store kept by Ned Travis, the father of Jack, discussing their plans.

"These fellows seem to have got the notion that if Denver Dan is dead, his place has been more than filled by the Green Mask," said Jack, "and certainly he has done us many good turns."

"Have you ever seen his face?" asked Sam.

"I asked him to show it to me once," said Mike, "an' be Heaven he did."

"What was it like?"

"It war a grinnin' skull, that's what it war, an' I thought the divil had come fur me sure."

"That is a mask he wears, most likely."

"Perhaps it is, Misther Jack, but I niver axed him to show me his phiz ag'n. Wanst war quoit enough!"

At that moment Jack's father entered and said that someone wanted to see him about that baby that Denver Dan had rescued.

The young man left the room, and presently Mike also went out, saying that he was going off to look at some silver ore which had lately been brought in.

"There's been a new minin' comp'ny started down yer a piece," said Sam, "an' I'll bet thar's lots o' money to be made out'n it, an' in a squar' way, too."

"What d'ye think o' the band's doin's in the last fortnight?" asked Joe.

"I hear they're goin' tu hev a 'lection," continued Sam, drawing the sand upon the floor into little piles with his foot.

"What do you think o' hevin' Jack Travis fur a leader?" asked Joe.

"By gum, I'd like ter be the boss o' it," Sam answered, though in rather an abstracted way, as if he did not exactly know what he was saying.

"Do you think you'd do better'n Jack?" asked Joe.

"'Course I would. What does he know? I kin control a heap o' votes an' lots o' money, an' Denver Dan could

a told ye that even him, sharp as he war, couldn't manage the thing better."

"So you ain't sorry 'at Dan hez stepped out?"

"What the doose ye drivin' at? What do I keer, fur's this thing goes? He warn't the man to oppose me, I tell yer. Guess ye've been drinkin', tho' I never knowed ye ter git fuddled afore. Tell yer what, I'm goin' ter ax fur the place, anyhow."

"Ye won't get it, fur thar's a better man up fur it."

"Who is he?"

"Handsome Jack Travis."

"Pshaw! he be blowed," said Sam, impatiently. "He's a good feller, an' a crack shot, an' honest as the sun, but as fur as knowin' anythin' about the business o' runnin' a——"

Sam did not finish the sentence, but with a gesture of impatience arose and went out of the room.

"I'd be 'nation sorry ter think 'at Sam Horton had gone back on ther mem'ry o' Denver Dan," said Joe, "an' thet he war tryin', by underhan' means, ter git chosen as the boss o' our band. Control votes, eh? Means fur ter buy 'em up, I s'pose? We can't have nothin' o' that sort goin' on here, an' Sam Horton 'll hev ter be watched."

"Hate ter do it," he continued, "fur I allus did like Sam, an' thought he war ez squar' a man ez ye c'ud find in a day's travelin'. Wull, it's on'y a week now to 'lection, an' I guess we don't hev no Sam Horton fur boss, not if he's gwine ter be runnin' down Jack, an' talkin' o' his infloence."

That afternoon, as Sam was passing on horseback by the spot where Ned's old house used to stand before he moved nearer to Denver, he saw Joe Darrell and Jack Travis talking to the person known as the Green Mask.

Of late, the principal members of the band, those who composed the inner circle, had often met the man, though he would rarely speak to them, and then only in the fewest possible words, and always in that hollow voice which was so mysterious.

He had informed them of the intended assault upon the band, though how he had discovered it he would not say; and the outlaws had received a warm reception, during which several had been killed, and the Wolf had lost another part of his body, to wit, his right ear and a part of his cheek.

Joe Darrel had done this with a blow from an old cavalry saber he sometimes used, and had not his foot slipped in a pool of clotted blood, Mr. Larry would have been cleft from head to heel, instead of getting away with the loss of his ear, which was sliced off as prettily as one could imagine.

Texas Jim had again escaped, although more than twenty men had sought his life, and more than one bullet entered his body, which he carried with him when he left, as mementoes of the interesting occasion.

Many of the band had received bad wounds, from which they happily recovered, with the exception of two, and two more were killed instantly at the first assault.

The outlaws had received such a lesson, however, losing more than half of their remaining number, that they concluded to leave the neighborhood of Denver for one more congenial.

They succeeded, before leaving, in rifling a coach and getting off with considerable plunder, having shot the driver dead and disarmed the passengers before they well knew what had happened.

Then they had decamped for parts unknown, and the only regret expressed after their departure was that Texas Jim and Larry had not been killed with the rest, as they were the most dangerous men in the whole gang.

As Sam came up, the man in the green mask walked away, and when the returned Australian reached the others, the man was nowhere to be seen.

"The y'eth must've swallied him up," he said, with a laugh. "What were you fellers chattin' about?"

"He wants to know if we've picked out a leader yet," answered Joe Darrel.

"Did he want to take the job?"

"He didn't say so, positively," said Jack; "but I guess he'd like it first-rate."

"We don't want him," said Sam, half in anger; "we don't know enough about him. Nobody knows him. We ain't none on us seen his face, and we ain't goin' to give up to a stranger the place what Denver Dan filled so well."

"Maybe you'd like it yerself?" said Mike, with a glance at Joe.

"Me? No, sir; I ain't fit. There's better men 'n me, that ought ter take it. Seems to me, though, we git on fust-class with Jack at our head"—Jack, meanwhile, having strolled off—"and there's on'y one man what could do better, an' that war Dan hisself."

At that instant the well-known whistle of Denver Dan was heard, and the men sprang for their horses, which were concealed near by, Sam being already mounted, as before stated.

They all galloped onward, and soon came up with Jack, mounted and masked, engaged in defending a man from the attacks of half a dozen ruffians.

"Now, my brave lads!" he cried. "Cut 'em down, and never forget the memory of Denver Dan!"

CHAPTER X.

A STRANGE PROPOSITION AND ITS ACCEPTANCE.

THE month was up, and the question of choosing a leader for the mystic band, formerly led by Denver Dan, was to be decided.

The place of meeting was not in the cavern leading from Sam's Pocket, but in another at some distance from it.

Every member of the band was present, and Jack Travis occupied a bench raised higher than the seats of the others.

The meeting was called to order, and then Jack stated the purpose for which they had gathered, and asked for an expression of opinion.

Before anyone could speak a noise was heard in the rear of the cavern, and the Green Mask appeared.

"I am no stranger to this place," he said, "and I claim a right to enter. This cavern is mine, and I can guess how you discovered it. I do not deny your entrance, but I claim a sitting."

No one offered any resistance, and the man walked forward until he came to the place where Jack sat.

He took a seat on the bench next to Jack, and then said:

"Will you choose me for your leader if I offer myself?"

"No!" burst from a hundred throats.

"You consider me a friend?"

"Yes."

"And value my friendship and assistance?"

"We do."

"Suppose Denver Dan was to tell you to choose me as your leader, would you do it?"

There was no answer, and Joe Darrel spoke.

"That 'ere's an impossibility, my friend; fur Denver Dan is dead. I s'pose we'd be safe in sayin' thet we'd do it if Dan said so, wouldn't we, boys?"

"If the dead can speak—yes!"

"The dead has spoken, and I bear a letter from Denver Dan himself, commanding you to choose me as your leader."

"Let me see it," said Jack.

The strange man drew a paper from his breast, and handed it to Jack, who read as follows:

"Trust the Green Mask, and do as he bids you. I would confide my soul to his keeping. DENVER DAN."

"What do you say to that?"

"There can be but one answer," replied Jack. "If, by the whole and unanimous verdict of the band, you are chosen our leader, well and good; if not, you must be content to aid us, if you will, as you have done in the past. I know that you would not work against us."

"Let me hear what the band has to say upon the question."

Sam Horton was the first man to arise, and what he said was this:

"'Pears to me thar's somethin' kind o' crooked hyar. Denver Dan, bein' dead, couldn't a' writ that 'ere paper, an' I'm inclined ter think, though it do look like his hand, that it's a forgery. I say, stick by Handsome Jack until Denver Dan rises up out'er his grave an' tells ye ter take someone else."

Sam sat down amid great applause, and Mike Holcraft, springing to his feet, said much the same thing, with the exception that he proposed Sam Horton for the leadership.

Sam was upon his feet in an instant.

"I decline th' honor," he said. "I never axed fur it, never wanted it, an' couldn't fill the bill. When the thing fust came up, a month ago, I was impatient 'cause ye didn't every one on ye pick out Jack Travis, right off. Don't ye vote for me, 'cause I won't have it."

"What do you propose to do next?" asked Jack, a deep silence following Sam's sitting down.

"Choose a leader," said Joe. "We don't know this stranger, and until we do, we can't listen to him. Will he take off all his masks? fur I understan' he has more'n one."

"No."

"Then, Mr. President—as I b'lieve that's the way ter say it—I move that ye put Mr. Sam Horton's motion to the house."

"Yes—yes!" shouted all.

"As I understand it," said the young fellow, with a laugh, "the motion was that I should be retained as your leader until Denver Dan came from his grave and told you to take somebody else in my place."

"That war jist what I said," spoke up Sam, "an' I stick to it."

"Are you ready for the question?"

"Question—question!" shouted every man.

"Then those who are in favor of retaining me as leader, under the conditions named, will please stand up."

Every single man immediately arose to his feet.

"I don't seem to see anyone sitting down, so I declare the motion carried."

"Then you reject me as your leader?" asked the Green Mask, in solemn tones.

"As the Green Mask, yes! Were you known, the result might be different. I cannot now, however, go back of the decision."

"You would give up your position if Denver Dan came from his grave and claimed the place himself?"

"Most assuredly I would."

The man leaned forward and whispered in Jack's ear.

"Can I see you and the members of the inner circle in the little cavern beyond this, the secret of which I disclosed to you?"

"Yes."

"Join me, then, at once."

The mystic individual arose, walked to the back of the cavern, and seemed to disappear through the solid wall.

Jack spoke to Sam, Mike and Joe, and they followed the stranger, finding themselves in a small, well-lighted chamber.

The stranger then threw off his green mask, and, to the

evident surprise of everyone, they beheld their well-beloved leader, Denver Dan.

CHAPTER XI.

THE MYSTERY EXPLAINED.

"DENVER DAN himself and alive!" cried Mike, Sam and Darrel in a breath.

"Denver Dan and no one else!" cried that hero, advancing and shaking hands.

"An' fur a hull month we've mourned ye as dead!" said Darrel.

"I am glad to see that you have kept my memory so green," replied Dan, "and that you have not let the good name of our terrible band become tarnished."

"And so you're the mysterious man that has gone about in a green mask scaring the lives out o' the Road Agents," said Sam, "an' you wanted the leadership of our band?"

"Which you did not give to me!" laughed Dan, "for all my coaxings. I am glad to see you so true."

"Do you think it quite right not to have let the inner circle know that you were still alive?" asked Sam, reproachfully.

"Some of them did know it, Sam. Jack Travis for one, but you must not blame me for that, I had my reasons. You have proved true, and though I never doubted you, there were some that did, and they now see that you were worthy of trust."

"Who were they?" asked Sam; "not Jack or Mike, I'll be bound."

"I cannot name them," said Dan.

Then Joe Darrel spoke up.

"Don't hold it ag'in me, Sam, fur I was one of them, and, in fact, the chief one what thought you wanted ter git things into yer own hands. Ye know ye told me you'd like to be boss."

"Pshaw! I didn't mean boss o' the mystic band, Joe," said Sam, "it wur boss of the new silver minin' company, what I wanted. I thought ye kinder stupid at the time to keep insistin' on Jack, when he don't understan' the business as well as me, kase I'm an older hand at it. Waal, I'm glad you've tried me, any how, an' found me full weight."

"And true metal in the bargain," added Dan, taking the rough but honest fellow's hand and grasping it warmly. "You're the right stuff, Sam, and I don't want any truer friend than you."

"Thankee, Dan, you've taken a load bigger'n your heart off'n mine, an' you kin count on me till death."

"Hooray for Sam Horton," cried Mike, and the shout that went up, assured the man that he had lost nothing, and that Denver Dan would stick to him as long as life lasted.

"Thankee, boys," he said. "Ye make me feel like cryin', an' I ain't done that since I lost my baby, twenty year ago. The poor little creetur follied his marm, livin' on'y a year arter she did, an' I thought my heart was busted then, sure pop."

"Tell me," he continued, after a pause. "How was it ye warn't killed?"

"That was merely a figure that we put there," said Dan. "The head was filled with beet juice, and that's what made it bleed so. Jack and I thought we'd fix up a job on them. We meant to have told you fellows afterward, but then I thought I'd lay still for awhile, and perhaps we could do more if the Road Agents thought I was dead."

"You're the liveliest corpse I ever see, an' ye've made it hot fur them fellers. How'd ye disappear so suddint, allus?"

"I know all the little hiding-places around here so well that I can generally dodge into one of them when I like."

"How about the fire on the mountains the night the mail-coach war attacked?"

"Alcohol and powdered rosin thrown on the flame of my dark-lantern."

"Well, I'll be cussed. An' it were your own whistle we heard, them times."

"Yes, though Jack occasionally used it. It was he that blew the blast that night at Pete Brown's."

"He warn't anywhere in sight, an' sides that, it comed from the room itself, where we wuz."

"Do you remember the old negress? The one you threatened to kiss?"

"Sartin, she wur ez black az the ace of spades."

"That was Jack in disguise."

"The dooce."

"That makes twice the poor old thing has been made to serve our turn," laughed Jack, "for Dan imitated her the night he rescued Mary from the place."

"Well, I'll be cussed ef you two fellows ain't the cutest chaps what I've seen in a long time," said Mike. "I warn't altogether sure it wur Dan, though I knowed his marks. Be Gob, though, he wurruks in so many different ways that ye niver can tell phat he's going to do next."

When Mike got excited he generally struck out into his native brogue, but at other times he adopted the dialect of the mountains.

"Are you ready to step from your grave and claim your old place?" asked Jack of Dan.

"I suppose I might as well, though you seem to have filled it to the entire satisfaction of the band."

"That is because they don't know how much help I have received from you."

"Let us go then and explain the mystery."

Jack went first, and stepping forward, said to the band, not a man having left the place, it being the rule not to break up a meeting until the president had declared it dismissed:

"Friends, I am about to resign my office, the conditions under which I took it having been complied with. Denver Dan himself desires it."

"Denver Dan!" shouted all.

"Denver Dan himself!" spoke the well-known voice of the leader, and then he stood before them, dressed as they had been wont to see him, his half mask on and his trusty rifle slung over his shoulder.

"Pardon me for a little deception, my brave lads!" he said, coming forward. "There were certain reasons for it, and I feel proud to think you have all remained so true to the principles of our organization. I have been able to do things which I could not have done had I been thought to be living; but now, all the neighborhood, and particularly the criminals, shall know that there is still a Denver Dan!"

"Three cheers for Denver Dan, our noble captain," cried Jack. "Now then!"

Three cheers were given with a will, and no one could doubt the great estimation in which Denver Dan was held by his men.

"For the first time," said Dan, when quiet had been restored, "I shall choose a lieutenant, for hitherto I have been supreme in command. With your permission, my first lieutenant is Jack Travis. Do you accept him?"

"We do!" was the unanimous response.

Dan folded Jack in his arms, and said:

"Jack, my lad, my true-blue, honest, noble-hearted Jack, I make you my lieutenant, because I love you and know that you will never prove false."

"If I do, may I be struck dead on the instant!" cried Jack, passionately. "Of all strangers, you are the one I hold nearest my heart, and I hope to die in disgrace if ever I prove unworthy of your esteem and confidence."

"Away with you, my lads!" cried Dan, "and be on hand when I next summon you hither."

The men departed, leaving the members of the inner circle by themselves; and leaving the large cavern in darkness, they went into the smaller one for the purpose of

holding a secret session. Jack had news of importance to relate, but what this was, and what was done in this matter, will be devoted to another chapter.

CHAPTER XII.

CONCERNING THE UNKNOWN WAIF PREVIOUSLY MENTIONED.

"You remember, do you not?" said Jack, "that I told you about a week ago about a man who laid claim to the baby, Charley, as we call him, whom you took from the Denver coach?"

"Yes, and the man's claim, you said, did not seem to be quite right."

"No; it seemed rather fishy, and I refused to deliver Charley to him until he could prove more satisfactorily that the baby belonged to him."

"He was its father?"

"No, only an uncle, and that's where the queer part comes in. He says that his brother-in-law, the father of the child, was killed by the Indians, out in Oregon. Now, we discovered that Mrs. Haredale's husband was in the east, and that she was intending to join him at once. If he was in the west, she certainly would not go east. Another thing, this man, whose name is Addis, says that his sister's husband was killed six months ago, and that his relations did not know of it until within a week."

"Wasn't there a letter found in the woman's possession?"

"Yes, signed 'Charley,' but without place or date, and the envelope was so torn and defaced that we could not tell where it came from. We named the baby Charley, you remember, on account of the name in the letter."

"Was it sent to Denver?"

"No, but to a place in Wyoming, and we concluded that she had only stopped in Denver on her way eastward. I have since discovered that the woman with whom she stopped here, said that she did so for a few days only, because she did not feel very well. She says that Mrs. Haredale often spoke of her husband, but never mentioned where he lived."

"That is bad."

"The man Addis went away very mad, and said that he would see if he couldn't get the child. He would appeal to the military authorities, he said, if nothing else would do, and find out whether he could have his own nephew or not."

"Has he returned since?"

"No; and the other day, the time I found the man struggling with those fellows near our old house, you recollect, I met Sam Carson, the stage-driver, in the evening and he said that a man, answering to the description of this one, was looking for his wife and child."

"Did he give their names?"

"No, and that's what bothers me. After we drove off those fellows, and I was almost certain at the time that Addis was one of them, he disappeared, and Sam says that he went to Wyoming."

"When he discovers that his wife has left there, he may come here and try to learn something about her."

"That's what I am in hopes of. This very afternoon

again I saw Addis talking with one of Texas Jim's pals, and I think that Jim himself is not very far off."

"Did he know you—Addis, I mean?"

"He did not see me, and before I could spot the other fellow they both disappeared down one of the side streets, going toward the direction of the den formerly kept by Brown."

"What do you think?"

"That these fellows are plotting to abduct little Charley, and I told father to keep a sharp lookout for them."

"There'll be trouble fur anyone what tries ter steal that kid," said Sam, "an' ef I catch anybody at it, they'll find out what stuff Sam Horton's made on. I've took a fancy fur that 'ere kid, an' ef anybody what don't own it tries ter come any foolin', he'll get peppered so bad thet he won't be good fur nuthin' but a sieve!"

"We'd better try and see the father as soon as possible—that is, learn whether the man Sam said went to Wyoming is the father or not."

"While you're doing that I'd better see that the young one is all safe," said Jack. "I'll stay in the house for a week."

"Do, my lad; there's nothing particular that demands our attention just now," said Dan. "It grows late; suppose we adjourn."

* * * * *

Three days afterward, toward evening, two men were galloping in the direction of the city, coming from the west.

They were still a long way off, but by dint of hard riding, they calculated that they could reach the city at midnight.

One of the men, he who rode the better-looking and more powerful horse of the two, was Denver Dan, and his companion, who appeared jaded and worn with anxiety, was the man Jack had spoken of as having been in search of his wife and child.

Dan had discovered him, and by adroit questioning had soon been convinced that he was the real father of the boy.

He had become alarmed at the non-arrival of his wife, and had written several times to know why she had not set out.

At last he ascertained, by writing to the friends with whom she had been stopping, that she had taken her departure more than a month before, and that they presumed she had long since arrived in the east.

He had sent for her, because he had decided not to return west, having recently come into a large property, and had been too busy, up to this time, to go after her.

Dan had asked him concerning his wife's brother, and he had given several very interesting bits of information.

Richard Addis was the black sheep of the family, though now there were none left but himself and his sister. His father had disinherited him on account of his wild ways, but of late an uncle had died in foreign parts, leaving all his property to Haredale's wife, which would revert, in case of her death, to her children.

If she died without issue, or if the children died before becoming of age, the entire property would revert to Richard, who, his uncle hoped, had by this time reformed.

Haredale said that he had heard of several attempts upon the part of Addis to make away with both the mother and child, but as they had only been rumors, he had paid no attention to them.

It had been but a short time before—since his wife started, in fact—that he had learned of the full provisions of the will, and knowing Richard's bad character, and the unenviable reputation he bore, he was at once filled with anxiety for the safety of his loved ones.

He knew that the man was unscrupulous enough to take their lives for the sake of getting the property, and he made no delay in starting for Wyoming, hoping to learn something definite of their fate.

He had spoken about the matter to Sam Carson, and the latter had said that he thought a child answering his description had been taken care of by Denver Dan.

The name suggested at once to Haredale that his son had fallen among outlaws, and he did not take the trouble to inquire if such was the case, but started off to look among that class for his boy, hoping that the promise of a reward would induce them to part with it.

After his rescue by Jack, he had departed at once for Wyoming, and learning there that Richard Addis had been inquiring for the child, and had gone to Denver, he set out at once to find the man, and see if he knew anything.

Then he met Dan, and discovered that the child was alive and well.

We will state here that Addis, ascertaining from the outlaws, with whom he was in collusion, that an orphan child was under the protection of Denver Dan, determined to claim it, get possession, procure proofs of the mother's death, have the baby meet with an accident, and then, armed with sufficient proof, claim the property, and live at his ease.

He had succeeded in everything but obtaining the child, Jack's sterling honesty being more than a match for his shrewdness.

Angered at being thus repulsed, he resolved to get possession of the child, at all hazards, and at the very moment when Dan and Charles Haredale were spurring their steeds forward, he was plotting with Texas Jim to get Jack out of the house, and to attack the place at night and carry the baby away.

He had even partly succeeded, as far as getting Jack away was concerned, of which plan, more will be said later; and another scheme was in readiness to be executed late that night.

Shortly after midnight the two riders dashed up in front of Travis' store, and beheld a scene of confusion, in the midst of which they learned that little Charley had been stolen.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE VILLAINS FOILED—CONCLUSION.

SOON after dusk that evening a note had been left for Jack at his father's house, which read as follows:

"DEAR JACK:—Addis is the man after all. He tells me much more than he told you. It's all right. Meet me at

the old place at ten. I have sent a messenger ahead with this. Don't disappoint, for there is business on hand.

"DAN."

The note was in Dan's hand, or seemed to be, and Jack did not question its genuineness, but started off on horseback for the place of meeting, taking the precaution of being well armed.

It was fortunate that he did so, for when he reached the place a band of outlaws, among whom he recognized several of Texas Jim's pals, dashed out upon him and tried to take him prisoner.

Putting his whistle to his lips, he blew loud and long, at the same time firing into the crowd of ruffians.

Some of Dan's band were generally within sound of the call, and as the shrill notes died away there was an answer, and six brave fellows galloped up, and seeing Jack, went at once to his assistance.

The outlaws, supposing that the entire band was following close behind, scampered off, one being killed by Jack's unerring aim.

The young man himself was wounded, though not badly, and he at once started to return, realizing that he had been duped, and very cleverly, too.

The outlaws, satisfied with having led him astray, dispersed among the mountains.

They had been told that they must detain Jack at all hazards, but the affair had not turned out as they anticipated.

They knew, however, that he could not get back to the house before Texas Jim and Addis would have carried out their plan, and that was all they wanted.

* * * * *

It was about midnight, and Ned Travis was sound asleep, when he suddenly heard the child crying.

It was not a usual thing by any means for the little fellow to wake up during the night, and Ned listened attentively for a moment to see if the cry would be repeated.

It was, and then it stopped so suddenly that he knew someone must have put a hand over its mouth.

With a precaution characteristic of the place, he seized his revolver and made for the room where little Charley slept.

The window was open, and a man was just getting out holding something white in his arms.

Ned fired upon the instant, and the man, with a shriek of pain let the bundle drop and clutched at the sash for support.

"My God, the child will be killed!" screamed Ned, running to the window just in time to see the man he had shot, and whom he recognized as Texas Jim, notwithstanding the mask on his face, slide down the ladder standing outside.

He could see that the child had been picked up, and that a man held it, trying in vain to stop its cries.

"Give me the brat," cried a man, whose voice he recognized as that of Richard Addis, "I'll soon stop its noise."

Ned drew a bead on the villain, who, he could see, had a pistol in his hand, and firing upon the instant, knocked the weapon from his grasp.

The sound of firing had attracted a crowd, and the Road

Agents, not fancying the company of honest men, drew off in short order.

They were pursued, and a running fire was kept up for a distance of a mile, by that time the robbers having scattered one by one and thus eluded their pursuers.

When Dan and Haredale came up and discovered what had happened, it seemed as if the poor father would go mad.

"Wait a bit," said Dan, "I'll have the baby yet; follow me."

When outside the town Dan blew three particularly loud blasts upon his whistle, and in a few moments had a large force at his side.

"Now to the rescue!" he cried, and away dashed the whole party, taking the general direction in which the outlaws had been reported to have gone.

Suddenly Dan heard shots ahead of him and could see that a combat was taking place; but who the contestants were he could not make out.

Thinking that maybe it was some of his own men, he signaled to them, and received an answer which told him it was Jack Travis with a small party of his followers, and that they needed help.

"Forward!" shouted Dan, and before long the party of outlaws, for Jack had encountered them upon his return, found themselves hemmed in on all sides by the determined Vigilantes.

Suddenly a man, that was not known to be one of the outlaws, attempted to dash through the lines, and would have done so, Dan's men offering him no harm, had not Jack suddenly cried out:

"Stop that villain; don't you see who he is? it's the scoundrel who tried to steal the child."

"Cut him down, my men!" cried Dan, at these words, at the same time making his way toward the man. "Ha-

ha! see, he has the babe with him now," added he, seeing the flutter of a white garment.

Then there was a childish cry, and Addis, for he it was, holding the child aloft, cried out:

"I'll kill the brat if you come any nearer. Let me go, and the child is yours!"

The only answer was a bullet through his arm, and as the poor baby fell from his grasp, it was seized, ere it could come to hurt, by Denver Dan himself.

Addis sprang from his horse and got away in the confusion, and was followed by many of the outlaws.

Texas Jim had not been seen, though he had been with Addis when they set out, in spite of the wound given him by Ned Travis.

The outlaws, such as were not killed, made their escape, and Dan, having accomplished the principal object for which he had started out, concluded not to pursue them any further.

The baby was found to be alive and well, though considerably shook up and not a little frightened.

It was carried back to Denver, allowing no one but Dan to hold it, and in his arms soon quieted down and went to sleep.

Little by little the boy seemed to become reconciled to his father, and at the end of a few days consented to go with him; and Haredale departed, taking with him the good wishes of Denver Dan and his friends.

Texas Jim and Larry the Wolf had disappeared, and no one could tell if they were alive or dead, and no one cared, so long as they kept out of the way.

The band of Road Agents was broken up, and the people had thus one more cause to thank the brave man and his gallant band, of whom we shall have more to say at some future time.

[THE END.]

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